

Exploring Dickens through a Director's Lens: a Study of the Cinematic Presentation of *A Tale of Two Cities*

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An interesting thing always noticed by avid movie-buffs is when one watches a movie made on a novel, automatically one starts identifying characters of the novel with the actors who have played those characters. Actors give new identity and life to the characters hitherto without any proper face or shape, enclosed in the black alphabets and yellow pages of the books. This paper is an attempt to see how the complex art of Charles Dickens find expression through cinema. *A Tale of Two Cities* is one of the two historical novels written by Charles Dickens. Attempting historical fiction is a tough task. Author has to shift back mentally to those ages and keep track of not only historical but also political, social, economic and spiritual environment of those times. Historically, *A Tale of Two Cities* has tried to capture extremely volatile years of French Revolution. Impacts of French Revolution were far-reaching and had been felt for many decades afterwards by Europe and later became an inspiration to many freedom movements in Asia, Africa and Russia. Praise to Charles Dickens for attempting such a story and also to all those directors who tried to portray such a razzmatazz on the big screen.

Books and films, both are expressions of a narrator's craft; only difference is that the place of an author is taken by a director in a movie. Director is also an artist in his own right; he is the one who gives cinematic expression to a writer's words. Readers get mesmerized by the author's vision while going through his or her work. World that belongs to a cinema hall is few hours' magic woven by a director's intense imagination. Readers are free to have their own interpretation of the literary work; audience are obliged to be guided by the omnipresent touch of the director. A movie based on a literary work takes author as well as director to the new level of creativity. At certain places director provides new insight to the author's words and at some other places himself gets overwhelmed by the author.

Charles Dickens' art is so varied, colourful, full of deep meaning, deals with such human emotions; that to interpret his work of art through cinema is a tough call for any talented director. Many directors have attempted to portray *A Tale of Two Cities*, one among the best of Dickens' novels; but 1958 version, directed by Ralph Thomas stands out. As one reviewer has put it, " Although most of the versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* are boring, much like the tired renditions of Beethoven's 5th symphony, this version is like the Herbert Von Karajan or Carlos Kleiber Orchestrations that are spectacular and

inspiring, as if played for the first time." There are beautifully crafted scenes in this film that create an interest in humanity of the characters.

A Tale of Two Cities is the story of Dr. Manette, his fragile daughter Lucy Manette and her husband Charles Darney. In scope the novel covers incidents as they take place in two vastly different cities namely London and Paris. Both Dr. Manette and Charles Darney are *émigrés* from France. Dr. Manette has been brought from Paris to London by her daughter after suffering fourteen years' long unlawful incarceration in the hands of feudal lords. Charles Darney belongs to a Noble lineage, does not like the tyrant ways of his Evermonde family and himself relinquishes his estate and title, migrates to London and later marries to Miss Lucy Manette. Incidentally, Darney's Evermonde family is one who had been instrumental in Dr. Manette's fourteen years' long imprisonment. Both Darney and Lucy are ignorant of this fact but Dr. Manette knows it from the very beginning of Darney's pursuit of Lucy's hand in marriage. Twist in the story comes when Darney receives a letter from his old servant, now a prisoner of revolutionaries in France, pleading for his help to get him out of jail. Darney sets out for France, immediately gets recognized as a member of Evermonde family and is thrown into prison. Now starts Dr. Manette's herculean efforts to save Darney from death by Guillotine. Equally determined is Mrs. Defarge, one of the leaders of Revolutionaries (*Communes*), to make Darney suffer because Evermonde family had tortured and killed her entire family. Sidney Carton, a character of low repute, who has always been in love with Lucy, decides to sacrifice his life for his love's happiness. He replaces Darney with himself in the prison and dies a heroic death.

French Revolution forms the background of this novel. Complete understanding of this revolution is a must to understand the scope of the subject which Dickens had undertaken to present in the form of a touching story. French Revolution was a combination of various dreadful events roughly spreading from 1787-1799. It all started with many years' of bad weather and poor harvesting; common people overburdened with taxation; unjust and cruel feudal system; wars and subsequent financial crisis and complete incompetence of Louis XIV, the king of France, to lead the nation out of this chaos. New rich class of elites—merchants, manufacturers, and professionals, often called the bourgeoisie; who were not noble but desirous of holding political power, fuelled the desire in common masses to remove monarchy and to place a democratic government in its place. In the then existing Monarchy- Feudal system, bourgeoisie could never aspire to achieve political representation. So along with *Communes* (i.e. commoners mainly farmers, labourers, small time manufacturers like blacksmith, cobbler, carpenter etc) they tried to introduce a 'constitution' for the French people. King alarmed by this development started inducting mercenaries in French army. This in turn rang alarm bells to the insurgents and they stormed Bastille on July 14, 1789. Bastille, the ultimate symbol of Monarchy, had a huge cache of weapons and

ammunition. Mobs emboldened by the possession of weapons, started full scale war against Nobles. Many were slaughtered there and then by the raging mobs. Everywhere in France, common people captured Nobles' *chateaus* and killed them by dozens. Entire nation fell into deep anarchy. Raging food crisis forced women to stage a march to the palace of Versailles, King's palace, on Oct. 5, 1789. Women were protesting against acute shortage of bread and steep rise in food prices.



March towards Versailles, 5 Oct 1789

Around 7000 women stormed the palace of Versailles and killed many French Guards. Monarchy fell. Robespierre, the incorruptible, and his Jacobin party took the reign in their hands. They unleashed a reign of terror. More than 17000 people were guillotined without proper trials. As the saying goes—as you sow, so shall you reap; judgement finally came knocking at the door of Robespierre as well. He was arrested and guillotined. With his death 'reign of terror' ended; the new constitution got implemented which subsequently paved way for Napoleon's rise to power. France was still destined to face decades of uncertainties further before the final realization of a government 'of the people, for the people and by the people'.

Opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* is the most impressive among all Dickens novel and one of the most impressive among Victorian fiction. Lots of adjectives (metaphors) are placed together as antonym to bring out the chaos and mayhem of French Revolution.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face . . . spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, as at this. (Dickens, 3)

Hardest thing for any director would have been to capture the essence of the words and present scene with the same depth and meaning. French part of this movie opens with a wonderfully captured scene of a busy market place. Narrator speaks the same words and camera captures different aspects from different angles. All of a sudden within the minutes of the starting of the film 18th century comes alive on big screen. Mood is set for a classic movie on an all time classic novel.

Guillotine, the terrible machine, Dickens describes it fantastically.

a youth to have his hands cut off . . . It is likely enough that rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain moveable framework with a sack and knife in it, terrible in history. (Dickens, 4)

The paragraph about the hangman and the people he hanged contains entire socio-political-financial history of that period in brief. First two pages of the novel are crowded with sheer honesty and vivid but brief description of the main historical events of those days. These two pages can outshine any lengthy volume of history on the same event. Only a true artist can write like this. Director Ralph Thomas understands the complexity of the text and the subject on which it has written. He doesn't try to use any Hollywood gloss to hide filth and the cruelty of the novel. Despite having the option of a coloured version, he has deliberately kept it a black and white movie. Lack of colour has enhanced the drama and has made the tragedy more poignant.

The language, with which the chapter on Charles Darney's court case starts, is the best example of Dickens' craft—lawyers' evasive talk, art of putting forward an argument, false witnesses, cooked-up stories. Here Ralph has remained faithful to the original text and has used Dickens language ditto. Actors have made scene more remarkable with their flawless acting, especially the supporting cast. Cecil Parker's performance, as judicious and very professional Mr. Jervais Lorry, displays British reserve as well as compassion very much needed for such a character. Leo Mckerny is Hollywood typecast as a blustering barrister, fit for this role.

Breaking of a large wine cask in the narrow street of St. Antoine, Paris and the scavenging of wine by hands, fingers, dirty scarves by a multitude of people brings forth at once the poverty—extreme hunger of those times. People were starving.

cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance and want . . . the children had ancient faces and grave voices . . . was the sign, Hunger. (Dickens, 33)

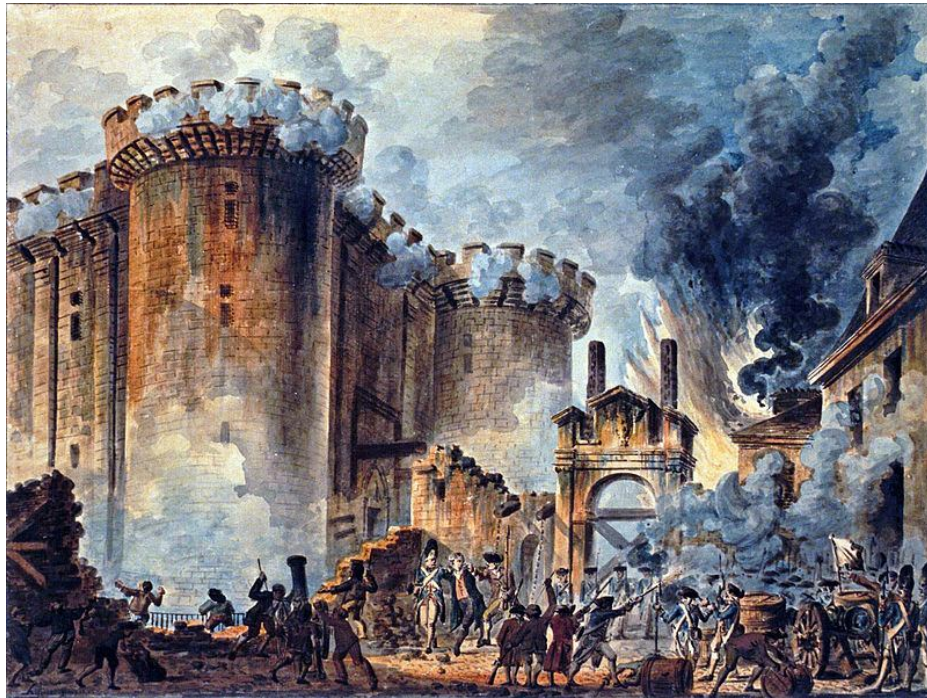
This scene has lots of greys and white shades. Perfect lighting and ghastly make up of the junior artists along with the mad rush to soak wine impart more impact on the

audience. The camera work is excellent, and the black and white footage is shot using natural light and accentuated shadows.

Most thought provoking is the Imagery of Jackal (Sydney Carton) and Lion (Mr. Stryver) at work. Usually Lion hunts, Jackal eats whatever remains. Here the case is reversed; Jackal is hunting for the Lion. In the movie as well, Dirk Bogardy is so convincing in his portrayal of a lost creature that he is not expected to rise to the levels of a professional lawyer. He appears to be so much convinced of his own degradation that a superhuman effort is needed to gain redemption.

Monseigneur holds his court like a king. As in the novel, in movie's portrayal as well, his court has all the elements—embellishments; grandeur; shallowness; political deceit; greed; fine art of flattering; stooping to moral shame for worldly gains; human weakness of worshipping the powerful.

Dickens triumph lies in the description related to storming of Bastille



Fall of Bastille, 14 July 1789

and the slow transition of Revolution into a bloody mayhem; anti-social elements, characters of bad repute acquiring centre stage and doling out death sentence to all and sundry. Guillotine, the ferocious lady, gets busier and busier. Former repressors are displaced, new repressors have taken their place, aptly justifying the maxim- more things change, more they remain the same. Ralph's filmmaking does not deal in understatements. Rabble crowd scenes are impressive; but a hysterical and frenzied expression appears to be superimposed on the entire crowd. The trials before the

Revolutionary Parisian tribunal realistically depict spirit, drama and excitement of those troubled times.

Movie is not the faithful version of the novel. Some scenes are modified which make the story appear much better. In one of the climax scenes, Barsad (Donald Pleasence) a spy, a character of very low repute, finally catches on to the heroism of Mr. Carton and holds his hand out for a respectable shake. This gesture is enough to convey a message that finally in the midst of all mayhem some good angels are bringing hope to the world, even to low character like Barsad. It is very touching. This scene is a proof of Ralph Thomas' master craftsmanship. This sort of directing pervades throughout the film, the main reason for this 1958 version being the best.

Characterization, always a strong point with Dickens, is more so in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Mr. Jervais Lorry gets introduced with all the seriousness of a banker; then Miss Manette with all her delicate beauty; but lady in red, Miss Pross steals the thunder.

Why don't you go and fetch things, instead of standing there staring at me? I am not so much to look at, am I? . . . And you in brown! Couldn't you tell her what you had to tell without frightening her to death. (Dickens, 29)

Lines reveal sheer strength of character; a courageous soul- tender to the core, very hard and rough from outside. Sadly in the movie Athene Syler is not able to do justice to this strong character.

Character of Mr. Stryver is representative of that typical ordinary man from an ordinary background with an extraordinary desire to achieve worldly success, by hook or crook.

he was stout, loud, red, bluff and free from any drawback of delicacy, had a pushing way of shouldering himself (physically and morally) into companies and conversations, that argued well for his shouldering his way up in life. (Dickens, 87)

Dirk Bogarde, impossibly handsome, fits superbly as directionless but passionate Sydney Carton.

He shows the best that is in us, and is the best of us, in desperate times. (Donald Pleasence, *A Tale of Two Cities* (movie), 1958)

Even before the start of the third book of the novel up to which Sydney Carton has been shown as the scum of the lower strata of life, his character displays sensitivity, intelligence and depth of emotions which make him incomparable to all other male characters of the novel. Perhaps Sydney Carton's values are beyond the understanding of today's audience still Dirk's rendition of this exquisite character makes him believable, even to today's generation. Bogarde provides charisma to flawed, fascinating, cynical, damaged but wonderful character of Sydney Carton. Darney and Carton are not played

by the same actor. That is good for the movie as much of the dramatic tension comes from having just enough similarity but not too much.

Madam Defarge's all consuming hatred, her ferocious personality, her stealth, her command over her peers, her warrior mode and her knitting—make her an overpowering influence on the whole novel. Strangely when the story begins, most of these qualities appear to belong to Mr. Defarge. By the time French Revolution takes the form of a dangerous thunderstorm, ready to uproot everything, showing scant respect for human life or institutions; the humane aspect of Mr. Defarge overtakes, perhaps overwhelmed by so much of devastation and bloodshed. Rosalie Crutchley has been able to do justice to Madam Defarge's larger than life character although same cannot be said about Duncan Lamont whose rendition of Mr. Defarge remains average.

Christopher Lee has played conceit driven supercilious Marquis St. Evermonde to perfection. Dorothy Tutin is convincing as Lucie Manette. Supporting cast is generally very good.

Every work of art has certain shortcomings. A Tale of Two Cities is not above it. The story has one major flaw which is the episode related to Mr. Lorry's taking away of Mr. Manette from Paris—the entire episode appears to be so unconvincing. It has never been easy to get out of cities so dangerously oppressed by the rulers. Also how did Dr. Manette get released from his incarceration and who secured his freedom—these questions are never answered in the novel itself. In the movie, playwright T.E.B. Clarke has bravely tried to insert scenes which try to provide explanations to these questions.

Works Cited

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